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Camilla Poesio, *Tutto è ritmo, tutto è swing. Il Jazz, il fascismo e la società italiana*

Milan, Mondadori Education, 2018

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1 Academic interest in the musical life of fascist Italy has never been strong, even among Italians. Back in the 1980s, Richard Taruskin thought he could explain the uninspiring nature of the topic, as he saw it, by reference to the poor quality of twentieth-century Italian composition.[1] He literally did not know what he was talking about. How could he, when the music even of one of the most internationally successful Italian composers of the fascist *ventennio*, Alfredo Casella, remained largely unrecorded, and thus inaccessible, until about ten years ago? Still today, many compositions held in the highest esteem during the fascist era remain inaudible, except in poor quality bootlegs of Italian radio recordings from the 1950s and 60s. In any case, Taruskin's argument hardly explains why the musical life of the Third Reich has always received so much more attention. Concert audiences today show no signs of thirsting for performances of such Nazi favourites as Paul Graener or Werner Egk, any more than they demand to hear the music of their fascist equivalents: Ildebrando Pizzetti, for example, or Goffredo Petrassi. All of which is to say that the problem of the comparative historiographical neglect of the issue of fascism and music has no easy explanation. And yet the account given by Camilla Poesio in her new book gives a strong hint as to where the problem lies, at least where Italian scholarship is concerned.

2 Pioneering musicological students of the fascist period (Fiamma Nicolodi in Italian, John C.G. Waterhouse and Harvey Sachs in English, Jürg Stenzl in German) concerned themselves almost exclusively with art music. The study of popular music under Mussolini, in this case jazz (which really means swing), is an even more exclusive niche interest, though here the comparison with the vast bibliography on jazz and the Nazis is even more telling. Poesio points out (p. 1) that a catalogue search for '"Jazz" e "Fascismo"' produces but a single result, Luca Cerchiari's 2003 book of that title.[2] Musicological texts on the history of jazz in Italy do exist, notably the two-volume study of Adriano Mazzoletti.[3] But Poesio distinguishes her short book from work of this type. She is not a musicologist but a historian; hers is a work of social history, based primarily on non-musicological documents. The question she wants to answer is not: What did Italian jazz of the 1920s and 30s sound like? Rather, she asks: Who listened, and more particularly, who danced to this music? What kind of impact did jazz have on the society of fascist Italy? The importance of jazz, for Poesio, lies less in the music than in 'everything that revolved around it' (p. 4). 'From the beginning [...], to speak of jazz meant *not only* to speak of music' (p. 19).

3 English-language readers may find themselves smiling at the implication that a musicological treatment of jazz these days might concern itself in any great detail with music. An attempt to gauge the reception of jazz in fascist Italy is precisely what one would expect from a contemporary British or American musicologist (who would probably style him or herself a 'cultural historian' to boot). Poesio's training gives her confidence with a greater range of documentation than the usual deadening musicological restriction to newspaper journalism: she has also consulted government archives (including legal and Ministerial documentation and police reports), private diaries and letters, oral histories, and has conducted interviews. Her story is straightforward. Jazz came late to Italy, by comparison with France, Germany or Britain. It was brought to the peninsula in the 1920s by musicians who performed on the ocean liners that plied their luxury trade between Genoa and New York; by rich American tourists, who introduced the shimmy and the Charleston to exclusive Italian hotels (Poesio has an entertaining chapter on Venice, starring Cole Porter, p. 47-58); by returning emigrants to the US; and later – to those who could afford such consumer items, ferociously expensive as they were in fascist Italy – by gramophone records and by the radio. Only with the appearance of sound film in the 1930s did a population outside the social elite of the Northern cities get much of a chance to enjoy this music (p. 8, p. 42-43). As late as 1942, Poesio points out, there were still fewer than two million subscribers to the state broadcaster in Italy (p. 39); the number of licenses issued by the BBC that year, in a country of comparable size, was well over four times as large.

4 The primary value of jazz for Poesio, which is to say, its effectiveness as a 'historical *agent*' (p. 68), is bound up with female emancipation. To dance the Charleston, for young Italian women of the 1920s or 1930s, was to dress, to move one's body, to relate to the opposite sex, in manners that suggested a liberation from traditional, patriarchal expectations. Jazz was the herald of 'a new kind of woman' (p. 70). As one might expect, and as Poesio demonstrates in detail, the Church was horrified by the spectacle of young females uninhibitedly enjoying themselves, and issued all kinds of dire warnings with regard to the consequences. Barren wombs, spinsterhood and tuberculosis all lay in wait (p. 71-75).

5 The attitude of the regime could be similarly disapproving and repressive. Never better than ambivalent about the products of US culture, the fascist authorities were attempting to 'distance' Italians from jazz already in the mid-1920s, temporarily shutting down nightclubs where the music was played, in order 'to protect public morality' (p. 109-110). With the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, Italian discourse on jazz, generally marked by racism from the later 1920s onwards (p. 95), became stridently racialized. Crude attacks in the press on the 'morally primitive' and certainly un-Italian character of the music were conflated from 1938, following Mussolini's alliance with Hitler, with anti-Semitic outbursts. Jewish musicians were thrown out of work, and coordinated efforts were made to reduce the amount of 'foreign' music performed or broadcast (p. 86, p. 114). This drive towards autarchy in musical production nevertheless had a positive aspect, inasmuch as it resulted, in the late 1930s and early 1940s (though Poesio does not put it this way), in a golden age of Italian swing. Italian musicians were enjoined to develop a national form of popular dance music, more melodic than syncopated, and featuring local instruments, in particular the accordion, rather than the saxophone. Their work was recorded by the state record label, Cetra, or by one of the commercial record labels that continued to operate: Fonit, Odeon and Columbia, for example – all of which (like Cetra) maintained their own bands. In contrast to the situation with art music of the period, access to this material is unproblematic: with YouTube, quantities of fascist era jazz are just a few clicks away.

6 Censorship, though, became increasingly heavy-handed, with titles of songs, lyrics and the nationality (and 'race') of composers under suspicion. The very word 'jazz' had to be replaced with Italian versions, like 'giazzo', or periphrases such as 'musica ritmica' (p. 87-88). After the declaration of war on the United States in December 1941, English terms associated with jazz were eliminated; early the following year, 'all performances of syncopated music of Anglo-Saxon origin and character' were outlawed (p. 115-116). The question for Poesio is why fascism did not ban jazz entirely, when theoretically it might have done so. Her answer (p. 2, p. 85, p. 123) is that however much Mussolini's racist officials may have considered jazz a 'Jewish music', they simply could not forbid it. Jazz was too popular among the Italian population; to have banned the music would have been counterproductive with respect to the regime's basic aim 'to maintain an internal consent and to last' (p. 123). So fascism tolerated jazz, at least in the Italianized form it sanctioned.

7 It is here, at the core of her account, that Poesio's work is most vulnerable, and here too that a connection can be drawn to the problematic character of Italian writing on music and fascism more generally. Rather than move straight to a critique of Poesio's book, though, it is worth glancing at a text that was put together contemporaneously with it (neither author refers to the other's work): Anna Harwell Celenza's *Jazz Italian Style*, the first full-length English-language study of this repertoire.[4] Like Poesio's book, *Jazz Italian Style* is historical in focus, though Celenza shows considerably greater interest than Poesio in the careers of individual musicians, and to that extent, her work is more musicological. Especially rewarding is the focus on US-Italian musical relations. For example, Celenza pursues the earliest appearances of jazz in the peninsula, courtesy of the US military, in much greater detail than Poesio. The story of Italian jazz begins not, as Poesio would have it, later than elsewhere in Western Europe (p. 1, p. 18), but already in 1918 (Celenza, p. 41-49). Celenza's work is not without its faults. She operates throughout with a simplistic notion of Italian fascism as equating, without

mediation, to the whims of its dictator. But her basic argument is very striking. 'Jazz flourished in Italy', Celenza writes, 'thanks to Mussolini's support' (p. 4). Indeed, the music 'became a symbol of national identity' under the regime, 'the soundtrack for Italy's "Giovinezza" generation' (Celenza, p. 73).

8 It is extraordinary that two historians, working simultaneously on the same material, should have come to such contrasting conclusions. Can they really both be correct? If Celenza's account is to be preferred, this is not on account of any superiority in terms of thoroughness of research or methodological subtlety, but rather because Poesio seems so much in the grip of a kind of intellectual block that, on the one hand, has ensured that no more than a handful of Italian scholars have ever ventured onto the terrain of music and fascism, and on the other, has rendered unsatisfactory the majority of the accounts that have been produced. To put it bluntly, if the musical object under investigation is valued by the author – in the present case jazz, of which Poesio is evidently a fan (the book opens with a vignette of her learning to dance the Shim Sham (p. 1)) – then the rule is that this object must be shown to have been in some way subversive with respect to the regime, or at the very least, resistant to its blandishments. To the extent that the musical culture of the period cannot be isolated from the regime in one manner or another, it is barely discussed. And one can see the logic here. To grasp jazz as functional to the regime's propaganda efforts is to accept that to celebrate the work of Gorni Kramer, Pippo Barzizza, Natalino Otto, the Trio Lescano, and so on – the heroes and heroines of Italian swing in its golden age – is, at some level, to celebrate the culture of fascism itself.

9 The problem is one long familiar to anyone who has worked on Italian musical modernism of the fascist period. Since the 1960s, it has been an article of faith for Italian commentators (especially for those on the Left) that the work of certain composers, Luigi Dallapiccola above all, but also Gian Francesco Malipiero, can in some sense be redeemed from its fascist entanglements by way of its stylistic nonconformity. This argument was never more than of dubious validity, but is in any case fundamentally belied by the way in which Italian musicology has always treated the work of Casella, the leading modernist of the period. Active as a composer between 1902 and 1944, his work up to 1920 (much of it composed in Paris) is studied in depth, while that of 1923 onwards – the work of his full maturity – is almost entirely neglected.[5] The reason for this treatment is not far to seek, for the Casella of the 1920s and 30s coupled his commitment to modernism with strident support for the regime. He was only too happy to proclaim the fascist content of his compositions, which included, in 1937, an opera, *Il deserto tentato*, in praise of the Ethiopian campaign.

10 The case of Casella is of direct relevance to Poesio's argument, since he crops up several times in her text as a defender of jazz against various anti-modernists and racists, such as the elderly Pietro Mascagni. Another of Poesio's defenders of jazz, the young Turinese critic Massimo Mila (p. 28, p. 31), is politically impeccable. Mila was practically the only Italian musician of the period to demonstrate an anti-fascist commitment, serving a five-year jail term for his involvement with the proscribed organisation *Giustizia e Libertà*. Casella's political sympathies were very different. And yet Poesio declares that, 'His anti-conventional observations and his admiration for jazz, to the extent of coming out publicly against official musical politics, caused him [...] complications with the regime' (p. 36). She tells the well-worn story of the anti-

modernist, and also anti-Semitic, attacks on Casella (who was not Jewish), launched in 1937-1938 by the composers Francesco Santoliquido and Ennio Porrino (p. 99-100).

11 The manner in which Poesio introduces her account of this episode is telling. Having acknowledged that Mussolini himself, by his own explicit admission, rather enjoyed dancing to jazz, and that his son Romano would later play professionally, Poesio counters with the assertion that 'at an official level the regime took a completely different attitude, as the racist and later anti-Semitic comments of musicians close to the regime demonstrate' (p. 99). The idea is that Porrino and Santoliquido, anti-modernists and racists, represented the regime, while Casella, the jazz enthusiast, was its victim. But this is a misunderstanding. Santoliquido and Porrino were not 'close to the regime' *tout court*; they were close to a particular part of the regime, the Nazi-sympathising wing whose figurehead was the appalling *ras* of Cremona, Roberto Farinacci. Casella too was 'close to the regime': closer, one might suggest, than Porrino or Santoliquido, since he had much greater power. The campaign against him, in fact, sprang from the not entirely unjustified sense on the part of conservative composers that they were being excluded from the regime's most prestigious cultural events by Casella's programming decisions. Casella's wing of the regime was that headed by Giuseppe Bottai, who in 1937-1938 was Minister of National Education; Casella was particularly close to Nicola de Pirro, in charge of theatre at the Ministry for Popular Culture. In the 1930s, the *Farinacciani* and *Bottaiani* fought a continuous cultural turf war. The 'regime' as a single monolithic entity simply did not exist; the idea of an 'official musical politics' that might exclude Casella (p. 36) is Poesio's invention.

12 The problem for Poesio is that she can scarcely produce a single instance of a genuinely powerful voice in the regime arguing against jazz. Her focus on priests, or on the *Farinacciani* of the utterly deplorable journal *La difesa della razza*, drowns out the extent to which jazz was becoming ubiquitous in Italian cities by the closing years of the regime. Apart from the lyrics of a handful of songs that lent themselves to a certain scurrility in relation to leading figures of the regime (p. 114-115), there seems little that was very 'anti-conventional' in Italian jazz, though Poesio sticks to this label to the end (p. 121). If the music, by way of its associated values, encouraged young bourgeois women to think of themselves as sexually liberated consumers of the latest cosmopolitan fashions, that may have shocked the priesthood, and parents too, but it was hardly going to precipitate social breakdown. Quite the reverse, perhaps. Both Poesio and Celenza cite an extraordinary document from 1935, in which EIAR (Ente Italiano per le Audizioni Radiofoniche), the state broadcaster, by this stage transmitting a minimum of four hours of jazz daily[6] – on records, and played by two in-house bands – justified its choice of repertoire. EIAR played jazz, so it told readers, because, frankly, jazz was fascistic; or in EIAR's own words, 'because it seems to us that there is no music that responds better to contemporary sensibility, to contemporary life: a well-marked rhythm, but which permits all liberties; a form of servitude that gives the illusion of perfect independence' (Poesio, p. 62; translation from Celenza, p. 112, modified). Theodor W. Adorno himself could not have put it better.

13 Let us give the final word to Alessandro Pavolini, Minister of Popular Culture, who in 1941 and 1942, with tens of thousands of Italian troops in the field, continued to defend EIAR's programming. Journalistic complaints were being made (not for the first time) about the sheer quantity of jazz on Italian radio. But Pavolini was clear: 'the soldiers want these songs, these pop songs and also the dance tunes and this also represents the

desire of broad masses of all listeners.'[7] The alternative was also clear. If listeners could not find jazz on Italian radio, they would look for it elsewhere (for all that listening to enemy stations was by this stage illegal). And that would be a pity, Pavolini suggested, given all the effort that had been put into Italianizing jazz, not least by interspersing it with 'our own words and ideas'.[8] Where is the anti-conventionality here? To believe Pavolini, listening to Italian jazz was something like a fascist duty. For the most part, this music provided simple entertainment, without political significance. It remains attractive and enjoyable. As Poesio emphasises, certain elements of the regime and associated commentators found it deplorable. But as she also points out, the coming into being of Italian swing was inextricably bound up with fascist cultural politics (p. 123). Somewhat against the spirit of her book, then, we need to recognise the inevitably problematic character of any celebration of this music today. Yet that is surely a salutary conclusion. For why do we conduct historical enquiries at all, if not to challenge our contemporary tastes and prejudices?

NOTES

1. TARUSKIN Richard, 'The Dark Side of Modern Music', *New Republic*, vol. 199, n° 10, 1988, p 29-30; repr. as 'The Dark Side of the Moon', in TARUSKIN Richard, *The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, University of California Press, 2009, p 205-206.

2. CERCHIARI Luca, *Jazz e fascismo. Dalla nascita della radio a Gorni Kramer*, Palermo, L'Epos, 2003.

3. MAZZOLETTI Adriano, *Il jazz in Italia. Dalle origini alle grandi orchestre*, Turin, EDT, 2004; ID., *Il jazz in Italia. Volume secondo. Dallo swing agli anni Sessanta*, Turin, EDT, 2010.

4. CELENZA Anna Harwell, *Jazz Italian Style: From its Origins in New Orleans to Fascist Italy and Sinatra*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017.

5. For a recent contribution to this trend, see FONTANELLI Francesco, *Casella, Parigi e la guerra. Inquietudini moderniste da 'Notte di maggio' a 'Elegia eroica'*, Bologna, Albisani, 2015.

6. CELENZA, *Jazz Italian Style*, p. 93.

7. Quoted in CELENZA, *Jazz Italian Style*, p. 156.

8. *Ibid.*

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